

Exploring Factors that Influence Post-Secondary Enrollment in Rural Communities

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Abstract

The purpose of this research project was to understand better the factors that influence post-secondary enrollment in rural communities. Several quantitative studies have examined rural students' school experiences and post-secondary aspirations and provide the foundation for this study. This qualitative case study employed one-on-one interviews and document review at a rural high school in southeastern Ohio. The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experience of rural high school students and the influence of economic and social factors on their post-secondary aspirations. The objectives of this study were to: (1) describe students' post-graduation aspirations, (2) examine the influence of high school faculty, community members, immediate family, and economic resources on student's perceptions of enrolling in higher education, and (3) describe students' knowledge of college readiness programs and opportunities. Findings indicate that students need additional support when it comes to seeking a college degree. Out of the students interviewed, half had teachers who encouraged them to seek a college degree. Furthermore, the individuals that students interact with daily influence the chances of a child seeking higher education.

Background

When evaluating the outcome of rural students attaining their bachelor's degree, they are less likely to obtain a degree relative to suburban students. Suburban and urban students have odds of enrollment that are nearly 1.5 times larger than rural students' odds (Wells, Manly, Kommers, & Kimball, 2019). Rural youths' aspirations play an essential role in their subsequent development. Adolescents' extracurricular activities in high school, have an impact on their occupational and educational motivation and attainment of success (Beal & Crockett, 2010). Furthermore, adolescents must have a sense of belonging in high school. Smerdon (2002) found that students

on the vocational track feel less sense of belonging to one's high school. Rural youth also have a more significant chance than their urban counterparts to experience a less diverse school curriculum, shortage of teachers with advanced degrees, and inadequate access to career counseling and college preparatory programs (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Additionally, rural youth witnesses the success of urban youth and aspire to achieve the same goals, which include attending college, as individuals that were raised in a dissimilar way (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996). The connections and relationships that form in high school aid students in their success after graduation, but family is also a key factor.

Financial hardships of students' families are associated not only with the current state of adolescent adjustment but also with the change in psychological well-being over time (Conger, Conger, Matthews, & Elder, 1999). Furthermore, rural youth that encounters poverty face developmental challenges which correlate with educational problems (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Research has indicated that parental income has a mediating relationship through parental bonding, school climate, student grades, and student educational aspirations, thereby further increasing the chance that these students will seek post-high school options, including a college degree (Demi, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010). Although economic adversities are essential to study, occupational objectives among rural youth also need to be understood.

Students tend to seek guidance from their parents or guardians as they plan for college or career options upon graduation (Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). First-year college students also seek the guidance of their parents to help them navigate through life-altering situations that occur in their schooling (Kenny, 1987). Further, parents' familiarity with college and their knowledge of higher education correlates with their child's ambition in seeking a degree. Kim & Schneider

(2005) assert that parents who are actively involved in post-secondary school guidance programs can aid their children that are in lower-income households. Additionally, parental education and their knowledge on the process of getting accepted into college, and teacher expectations predict students' college attendance trends (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). The relationship between adolescents and their caregivers is an essential factor one must investigate to gain a deeper understanding of post-secondary choice and success.

Nearly nine million students attend public schools in rural areas, but limited research has examined the aspirations and the causation of why students are not seeking higher education (Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irvin & Weiss, 2013). To contribute to the literature related to rural students and contextualize these experiences to rural Ohio, we focused on one high school and conducted a case study to explore factors that influence post-secondary knowledge and aspirations.

Purpose and Objectives

In order to understand the various factors that impact rural student's postsecondary aspirations, the researchers sought to gather multiple perspectives through qualitative methods. The purpose of this research was to explore the lived school experience of rural high school students and how economic and social factors influence their postsecondary aspirations. Three primary objectives guided the study:

1. Describe students' post-graduation aspirations
2. Examine the influence of high school faculty, community members, immediate family, and economic resources on student's perceptions of enrolling in higher education
3. Describe students' knowledge of college readiness programs and opportunities

Methods

Research design

A bounded case study design framed this research. Qualitative methods were employed as this type of research aims to reflect the realities of individuals and groups rather than validating that knowledge through empirical testing (Birks, 2014). The bounded case study allowed researched to develop a detailed portrayal of rural high school students' experiences with school personnel, family, and community members and how this influences their postsecondary plans. Researchers conducted the research at Big Stone High School (pseudonym) in southern Ohio utilizing document reviews, review of student data, participant observations, and in-depth interviews with students, faculty, and staff.

Sample

A purposive sample of students, faculty, and staff was observed and interviewed. Researchers conducted 10 student interviews and 7 faculty and staff participants. Observations took place in 4 junior and senior classes. Additional interviews and observations were not possible due to time and logistical constraints. This purposive sample enabled researchers to identify if logical patterns existed among the communication and relationships of students and their families and school personnel as it relates to post-secondary choices.

Measurement/Instrumentation

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were held at Big Stone High School. A complete moderator's guide was created with questions that allowed for probing questions during the interview. The case study questions were designed to investigate the influence of family, school personnel, community members, and finances had on one's decisions related to postsecondary education after high school. Questions were derived from a review of the literature and validated by an expert panel. The constant comparative method and coding were employed to analyze the

interviews. Coding was used for document analysis (e.g., school surveys and college and career materials) and participant observations.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and any participant identifiers were substituted with pseudonyms when reported. The transcribed interviews were summarized, and codes developed for key ideas/concepts. An open-coding system was utilized to identify themes across interview respondents.

Findings

The students provided great insight into their high school experiences. Each objective drew out several themes that were explicitly discussed in the interviews that were conducted. Furthermore, the researchers were able to analyze the key concepts that were discussed by each student and teacher.

Objective 1: Describe students' post-graduation aspirations

Attitudes towards academics influence post-secondary plans. Student's post-graduation aspirations relate to their desire to apply or attend college. Seven students interviewed want to attend college, which may indicate positive attitudes toward this option. Additionally, three students do not plan on attending college. As one of the students stated,

"I did think about going to college. . . . I don't like school. I do well, but like, it's just not for me. My sister goes to college, and she tells me . . . it is a lot different than high school. I got accepted into colleges, but I didn't want to go."

This student's quote suggests that student's attitudes towards attending high school courses may influence the likelihood of students enrolling in college courses.

Concurrently, two out of the three students who did not enjoy class are not planning on attending college, showing a relationship between liking their high school courses and attending college.

One of the students stated, "After high school, I plan . . . to become a power lineman because that's what my family has done for a bit." Although some students do not want to attend college, these students have a plan to further their education through trade school. One teacher states,

"I think we've got a really strong focus towards where our students go after high school. When I first started, [the] pendulum was swinging towards college, everyone needs to go to college, and everyone needs to be college-ready. And I think that [Big Stone staff and faculty] realized that's not realistic . . . [and] that doesn't support our demographic. . . . And no matter where our students go, they're going to need some kind of education or skill training or further education and doesn't always necessarily mean like a four-year institute."

In this example, the teacher expresses that it is important to understand that college is not for every child. At Big Stone High School, teachers who were interviewed discussed that they wanted what is best for their students upon graduation. Trade school and other workforce development programs provide students with skills to help them in obtaining a job.

There were several reasons why students wanted to obtain a college degree. These reasons included being financially independent and enjoying their career. One student stated, "My only concern [after high school] is finding a job and being able to stay financially stable."

Concurrently, this student wants to obtain a degree to become an animal rehabilitation therapist. Another student stated, "[I want] to go to college so I can become an [Agriscience] teacher and to find a place to work." One must obtain a bachelor's degree to teach Agriscience, but this student understands that he must attend college to receive the credentials necessary for this career choice.

Furthermore, six teachers said that Big Stone High School does an excellent job of supporting all students in seeking further education and certification for jobs, and this may suggest why most students interviewed wanted to attend college. The faculty and staff in rural high schools play a primary role when it comes to rural youth in furthering their education.

Objective 2: Examine the influence of high school faculty, community members, immediate family, and economic resources on student's perceptions of enrolling in higher education

Financial concerns for the family. The individuals that students interact with daily influence the chances of a child seeking higher education. All ten students stated that their immediate family wants them to attend college, and most students planned to apply to a college, but many discussed financial concerns. One student remarked, "I think [my family] see [a college degree] as a good steppingstone, but sometimes they think of [college] as just an unnecessary debt. I feel like I hear that a lot from other kids. . . . That's why [students] don't want to [attend college]." This student's opinion was solidified by two other students that were interviewed. These students stated that their most significant concern about attending college surround financial issues. Financial limitations seem to be a constraint that are keeping these students from obtaining a college.

Family's level of education. Five students have had an immediate family member obtain a college degree. There is a correlation between student's immediate family wanting their child to earn a college degree and their past experiences with college. One student stated, "None of [my immediate family] really went to college. Jobs are hard to get if you don't get an education, and they want me to succeed and be able to provide for myself instead of relying on others." For this student, she is a first-generation college student. Her family is concerned that she can find a job and become financially stable.

Relationships with educators. All of the students stated that they have at least one close relationship with an educator at Big Stone High School. One student shares her experience with her teachers, "A lot of my teachers still talk to me outside of high school when they see me

around. And several of them have offered to help me if I struggle with college". The interactions between student and teacher help aid students in deciding what to do after high school.

Objective 3: Describe students' knowledge of college readiness programs and opportunities

Participation in programs. Three students stated that they participate in the College Credit Plus (CCP) program, which saves money on tuition and prepares them for college courses.

Additionally, Big Stone High School hosts an annual Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for students and their families to attend. Through these programs and opportunities, students learn more about the process of obtaining a college degree. Four students that were interviewed did not know what the FAFSA is nor how it can help them pay for college. One student stated, "I've heard of it [FAFSA], but I don't know what it is."

Awareness of scholarships. Concurrently, five of the ten students reported that they knew where to find scholarships. As one student stated, "Our school provided us with some [scholarships], and then I looked online. It's hard to find scholarships, though." Five students were interviewed that did not know where to find scholarships.

Discussion and Recommendations

Students need additional support when it comes to seeking a college degree. Most students interviewed have the ambition to obtain a college degree. Students' perceptions of their teacher's support for attending college was split evenly. Half did not feel they had the support of their teachers to go to college, whereas others expressed that they did have teachers who encouraged them to seek a college degree. Few students said that their teachers would answer questions that they had about college or discuss specific details about seeking a college degree with them.

Most of the students interviewed would like their teachers to have more discussions with them to help them prepare for life after high school. Students want to go to college, but they are unsure of

the proper procedure to take when applying for college. On the other hand, teachers discussed needing more resources to aid their students in encouraging them to seek higher education. Most of the teachers interviewed would like to have more resources to help promote higher education.

Out of the students interviewed, half stated that their community supports students' aspirations to attend college. Most of the students did not speak highly of their community and perceived the older generation as not encouraging of younger individuals to seek higher education. Several students expressed that they wanted their community to understand that younger people are trying to better their community. For example, students mentioned youth-centered programs (e.g., 4-H, FFA, Girl Scouts) and how they are providing students with opportunities to improve their hometown. Rural high schools could advocate for these youth-centered organizations by providing students with more information about these activities. Through these extracurricular programs, students can hear from an array of community members that have various jobs in the community. Concurrently, these community members can help provide students with guidance on how to obtain the credentials needed for a specific job.

More information on student aid needs to be presented to high school students and lead conversations that surround college-going culture. At Big Stone High School, the FAFSA and where to find scholarships were the two primary documents that were brought up in the interviews. Further studies need to analyze the effectiveness of communicating the FAFSA and scholarships to high school students.

Rural communities must encourage community members to help students feel supported. For example, an after-school program may need to be established to help prepare students for after high school success. The after-school program could invite community leaders to discuss their

accomplishments in their careers. Additionally, these community leaders can advise the students on what they need to do after high school (e.g., trade school, college).

Future studies should analyze what drives students to seek higher education and why they want to obtain a degree. The students interviewed in this study were not asked why they wanted to attend college. Further research needs to ask rural high school students why they want to obtain a college degree.

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Exploring factors that influence post-secondary enrollment in rural communities

Caleb Hickman, Dr. Jera Niewoehner-Green

BACKGROUND

There are several factors that influence the rates of enrollment of rural youth in post-secondary programs. Research has revealed that parental education, college preparatory track courses and experiences, and teacher expectations predicted students' college attendance (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). Economic struggles, occupational aspirations, and social changes in rural economics have influenced a notable difference in educational and occupational ambitions of rural high school students (Byun, Meece, & Agger, 2017). Perceptions of positive parent approval of attending college as well as direct guidance from parents can also effect post-secondary enrollment (Jenni, Coleman-Jensen, & Snyder, 2010; Griffin, Hutchins, & Meece, 2011). Several quantitative studies have examined rural students' school experiences and post-secondary aspirations and provide the foundation for this study. However, there is still limited research on student aspirations and the causes of students choosing not to enroll in post-secondary programs (Meece, Hutchins, Byun, Farmer, Irwin & Weiss, 2013) and few qualitative studies printing both student and teacher perspectives.

PURPOSE

- Explore the lived experience of rural high school students and the influence of economic and social factors on their post-secondary aspirations.

OBJECTIVES

- (1) Describe students' post-graduation aspirations
- (2) Examine the influence of high school faculty, community members, immediate family, and economic resources on student's perceptions of enrolling in higher education
- (3) Describe students' knowledge of college readiness programs and opportunities

METHODS

- Qualitative case study that employed the methods of one-on-one interviews and document review at a rural high school in southeastern Ohio
- Purposive sample of 10 juniors and seniors
- Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the constant comparative method

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FINDINGS

- Students need additional support when it comes to seeking a college degree.
- Out of the students interviewed, half had teachers who encouraged them to seek a college degree.
- Few students said that their teachers would answer questions that they had about college or discuss seeking a college degree with them.
- Teachers discussed needing more resources to aid their students in encouraging them to seek higher education.
- Out of the students interviewed, half stated that their community supports students' aspirations to attend college.

Objective 1

"I did think about going to college.... I don't like school. I do well, but like, it's just not for me. My sister goes to college, and she tells me... it is a lot different than high school. I got accepted into colleges, but I didn't want to go."

"After high school, I plan . . . to become a power lineman because that's what my family has done for a bit."

Objective 2

"I think, they see it as a good steppingstone, but sometimes they think of [college] as just an unnecessary debt. I feel like I hear that a lot from other kids. . . . That's why [students] don't want to [attend college]."

"None of [my immediate family] really went to college. Jobs are hard to get if you don't get an education, and they want me to succeed and be able to provide for myself instead of relying on others."

Objective 3

"I've heard of it [FARSA], but I don't know what it is."
 "Our school provided us with some [scholarships], and then I looked online. It's hard to find scholarships, though."

DISCUSSION

Objective 1

- Most students interviewed want to attend college which, may indicate positive attitudes toward this option.
- Two out of the three students who did not enjoy class are not planning on attending college, showing a relationship between liking their high school courses and attending college.

- Most of the teachers stated that they do an excellent job of supporting students in seeking a college which, may suggest why most students interviewed wanted to attend college

Objective 2

- Each student's immediate family wants them to attend college and most planned to apply.
- A few students stated that their greatest concern about attending college surround financial issues indicating this as a constraint.
- Most students find the high school guidance counselors helpful in preparing for college.

Objective 3

- Several students participate in the College Credit Plus (CCP) program which saves money on tuition and prepares them for college courses.

IMPLICATIONS

- Encourage community members to help students feel supported.
- More information on student aid needs to be presented to high school students and lead conversations that surround college-going culture.
- Rural high schools need to help explain to parents and students the variety of post-secondary options, including technical school and two-year degrees.
- Future studies should analyze what drives students to seek higher education and why they want to obtain a degree.

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